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AUTHOR Chambers, W. M.

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Abstract

The open time-extended group, run by multiple counselors, adds a facilitating dimension to the counseling function--a dimension that exemplifies the concepts of self-growth and self-actualization by first providing the atmosphere for the client and then by allowing him to progress at his own rate and to a depth which he determines. An open group differs from a closed group in the following ways: (1) no set size, (2) anyone can come, (3) participant behavior determines what is to be focused upon, when it will be focused on and how long the focus will remain there; and (4) time is practically limited to three to four hours, theoretically it should be unlimited. Varying group structure results in changing the dynamics of groups. Destructiveness or the tearing down of defenses without providing for new replacement patterns is more likely in open groups. There is also a significant amount of experimentation as well as creativity observed in open groups. Training values include the opportunity to observe co-workers to see how they handle certain situations. In addition, counselors working with open groups are esentially "forced" to develop spontaneity and flexibility in style. (Author/KJ)

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MULTIPLE COUNSELING IN OPEN AND CLOSED TIME-EXTENDED GROUPS

W. M. Chambers, Ed. D.

During the last two years, we have been examining a variety of group counseling approaches---placing our emphasis on multiple counselors, time-extension, and methods of structuring. Primarily, my remarks will concern the groups we have called unstructured or "Open".

Typically, a counseling group is structured on most or all of the following; size, membership, content, and time. To distinguish between the "closed" group, and the "open" group, these four structuring variables can be used. (1) Group size in a closed group is preset---the optimal number usually ranging between six and twelve, but the size remains relatively fixed once it is established. The size of the open group is undetermined---maximumally limited only by the physical surround of the meeting place. Minimum size is absolute zero. To provide the type of group I am describing, counselors must be willing to accept the possibility that nobody <u>wants</u> them! Whether they are <u>needed</u> is not the point. (2) Membership in a closed group is usually defined, e.g., deliquents, underachievers, drop-outs, college-bound, emotionally unstable, etc. The only determinant of membership in the open group is who comes. (3) A closed group generally has its content defined somewhat by the selection of its membership. The content can, of course, cover the gamut of topics, activities, and emotions. The time-extended closed group may be quite broad in terms of content, but even this type of closed group will place emphasis on a particular factor; e.g., emotional growth. Although counselor frustration may run high, an open group functions without content structuring. Participant behavior determines what is to be focused upon, when it will be focused on, and how long the focus will remain there. (A saving grace for some of us is that the group will occasionally ask us what we would

like to do!) (4) The time variable is probably the most consistantly structured variable for any closed group---including a time-extended closed group. However, it is not entirely realistic to hold that a given interactive situation or grouping be held for not-more-than, not-less-than a given period of time. We have found the time variable to be the most difficult to follow the open concept with. The groups we have run to date have not been unstructured according to time. We put no minimum on the length of time that a participant should stay---some stay as little as one minute---but we have had to maintain a three to four hour maximum. Later on, we do hope to try a few unlimited time spans with rotating counselors.

Having distinquished how we envision the open group, I would like to present a few thoughts on the interaction between multiple-counselors in such a group. Since the time factor is extended to some degree, the likelihood of one counselor maintaining a "lead" role is highly improbable. Counselors are much more prone to exchange roles, to examine their interactive capacities, and to work out relationships between themselves. This statement applies to the closed time-extended group, but is even more applicable to the open type. It would be unfair to use the definition of open for the participants only, so we allow it to hold for counselors as well. Our counselors are free to leave the group at undesignated times and for undetermined lengths. This procedure necessitates that the counselors work out their interactive patterns much more thoroughly than is usually done. Two other distinct advantages of open group multiple-counseling are the opportunity for rotating counselors during the time the group is in session and for examining the varying effects on the group and on each other of differing the number of counselors in the group at one time. Rotating counselors again enhances the probability that they will work through interrelationship difficulties. Varying the

number of counselors allows them the opportunity to observe their flexibility in role heirarchies and prevents them from stagnating.

Unquestionably, varying group structure results in changing the dynamics of groups. I will elaborate on some of those which seem significant to us. Destructiveness--the possibility of tearing down a client's patterns of defenses without providing adequately for new patterns to replace them has frequently been mentioned as a danger in counseling. In group counseling, this possibility is even more probable should the counselor lose control. The time-extended closed group has received vehement criticism because of the fatigue factor which enhances the likelihood that weak defensive patterns will be broken down. However, there are numerous advantages which accrue from the extension of time in a counseling group. The open time-extended group appears to retain the advantages of extending time while also dealing better with this problem of destructiveness. Although, it can be maintained that an open group only supports a client's evasiveness or inability to confront himself when he needs to, the format of this group allows the client to be "out" as much as it allows him to be "in", and this option appears very desirable when considering such a vital problem as destructiveness. Volunteering--the open group as I have defined it, is by its very nature, a voluntary group. It is important to recognize that volunteering is more than the opposite of non-volunteering. In many of our so-called voluntary groups, there are various types of subtle pressures that often induce a client to become a member. Even disregarding these, there are numerous "contracts" in a closed group which many clients would not self-initiate the contracts to come to all meetings, to be on time, to stay till the end of the session, etc. Since the open group requires none of these, it is here maintained that such a group provides the

ultimate degree of freedom implied and desired when we refer to volunteering. The lack of "contracts" needed because of the voluntary nature of the open group provides an additional value in terms of participant dynamics. Since there are no membership criteria, there is no demand that the person attending the group acknowledge a specific variety of problems or even identify himself as having one. Primarily because it does not demand a public statement that, "I need help", many clients will wander into an open group that would not volunteer for other types of groups. As you would expect, this group frequently provides the initial step necessary for the client to seek out other group or individual counseling. Spontaneity--we frequently mention as a counseling goal the acquisition of spontaneity or the ability to demonstrate in appropriate response to a situation. A desirable quality of the time-extended group is that there is an element of repetitiousness which provides participants with occasions to try various responses to the same type of situation and thereby the opportunity to enhance their spontaneity. In the open group, a different, but equally desirable quality exists because of the unidentified participants, the undetermined group size, and the constantly varying group composition--with the staggering number of emotional and topical fluctuations easily imaginable--the scene is optimally set for the development of spontaneity. Confidentiality--it is hard to imagine a less conducive environment in which to nuture the concept of confidentiality than the type of group I have been describing. When we first discussed the formation of such a group in staff meetings, it was our concensus that it would be impossible to attain a desirable degree of confidentiality. As we began the groups, we discussed confidentiality with the participants and spent significant portions of many of our first sessions in wrestling with this knotty problem. We finally just stopped focusing

on it altogether---might I hasten to add that we did not discourage the discussion of it---we simply quit bringing it up ourselves and the participants do not bring it up as something they are vitally concerned about. At this point, I take a rather heretical position in maintaining that it is not an issue of importance for this particular type of group. Counselor control--the closed group has a tendency to retain its focus on one event at a time---no matter how rapidly it may change focus. When time-extension is added to the closed group, it provides the counselor an opportunity to insure that an interaction is carried through. Time-extension provides this same opportunity in the open group, but the open group requires that the participants assume more responsibility for closure---otherwise they are free to, and may well, leave. The counselor's control over a given interaction is less; e.g., a participant can tell the counselor or the group to go to hell, leave the group, and take away the counselor's opportunity to bring the situation to a satisfactory conclusion. Also in reference to control, the probability of more events occurring during a given period of time is higher in an open group. Interruptions, sub-grouping, and unexpected changes of group members from observer to participant activity are more frequent and more unpredictable. Experimentation--due partially to the element of control just mentioned, participants in a closed group tend to wait for something to happen or to follow some pattern that has developed as a function of a particular group. This has a highly desirable quality when it seems appropriate for the counselor or the participant to be able to plan ahead or to predict. The open group provides a different type of situation which is equally desirable for many clients. Since the participant is there solely because he wants to be, and will stay only as long as he wants to, there is a strong tendency to feel committed to "getting something" for himself.

This dynamic leads to a significant amount of experimentation on the part of participants. It also loads heavily the amount of creativity which participants bring to their own problem-solving activities.

My final set of statements concerns the training values to be derived from group multiple counseling. There are some values which are relatively obvious and which have been discussed in the literature on co-therapy for a long time. One of these is that multiple counseling allows the co-workers to observe how each other deals with various situations and clients. Another is that it provides the counselor who may be "leading" during a given interaction or time-period with a professional "back-up" person for role-playing, for situations requiring a skillful auxiliary ego, for interactions which might need an alter ego, or for any other activity where an adequately functioning group member may not be available. A third value is that it provides both (or all) multiple counselors with the opportunity for immediate feedback from co-workers and with a professional resource person when in difficulty. There are also some less obvious or more subtle values which can result from group multiple-counseling. Among these is the removal of a demand that a counselor always be operating at top functional level (a demand that a counselor often levies upon himself or that a group will frequently attempt to impose on him). Everyone becomes tired at times and multiple-counseling provides an opportunity to learn how to shift responsibility. Two values which become particularly apparent if multiple counseling is rotated in order for one counselor to work with several co-counselors are: (1) there is less chance that any counselor will develop feelings of omnipotence when he has the opportunity to see that other counselors will pick up cues which he does not, or different cues than the ones that he does, but most importantly, that no person picks up

all cues, or does the same thing with the ones identified, and (2) there is much less likelihood that rigidity of style will develop as one sees others demonstrate effectiveness in other ways. Also worth mentioning is that even the very useful audio-visual equipment currently available does not provide the sameness or clarity of experience so valuable in reviewing sessions with supervisors or co-workers. A value which we also consider significant is the sense of comradeship which developes from assisting each other to get a client through a difficult experience, from sharing a particular, frustrating or seemingly fruitless session, from experimenting and learning together---these experiences can add a zest and enthusiasm to counselor growth and excitment not equaled by any other type of training activity. There are some training values which are unique to the type of open group which I have been discussing. Among these is a quality which essentially "forces" one to develop spontaneity and flexibility in style. From this type of group, even moreso than from other types, comes evidence supporting the concept of individual strength. I refer to my earlier comments regarding participant experimentation, less counselor control, and the assumption of greater responsibility by participants. As a training derivative, I believe that a counselor is provided with more examples which will enhance his respect for client strength. An extremely meaningful value of the open group is that it challenges many "sacred cows" of counseling---confidentiality, group size, time-limits, necessary others, counselor control, one-technique approaches---at the same time, it provides those who try such a group with actual experiences around which to formulate their thinking on these constructs rather than leaving one totally dependent upon references and/or logical reasoning. The last value which I would like to mention is that the open group can

be so structured as to be open to non-professional or para-professional staff. Desirable outcomes of this can include valuable training in helping relationships, a more complete understanding of counseling, and better communication within an institution or organization.

In closing, I would like to suggest that the open time-extended group, run by multiple counselors, adds a facilitative dimension to the counseling function---a dimension that exemplifies the concepts of self-growth and self-actualization by first providing the atmosphere for the client and then by allowing him to progress at his own rate and to a depth which he determines.